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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000162

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SUBJECT: PARTY LEADERS ANGRY WITH MILINKEVICH, FORGE AHEAD
WITH CONGRESS PLANS

REF: MINSK 150

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Political party leaders tried to assure Ambassador that the opposition coalition remained united, despite de facto coalition leader Milinkevich's refusal to participate in the upcoming congress of democratic forces tentatively scheduled for March 17-18. Calling his decision a big mistake, the party leaders claimed they had made several attempts to persuade Milinkevich to attend the congress, but thus far without success. Belarusian National Front head Vyachorka outlined his proposal to ensure Milinkevich's participation in the congress, but he has yet to receive a response from Milinkevich or other party leaders. Belarusian Party of Communists head Kalyakin predicted that Milinkevich would not agree to any concessions. United Civic Party's Lebedko cited the level of unity among urban and regional opposition activists on the need for a congress and maintained that the current problem between Milinkevich and the party leaders was just "temporary." End summary.

Regional Activists Want a Congress?

¶2. (C) Following de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's announcement he would boycott the upcoming democratic congress, and separate meetings between DCM and the three party leaders February 16, Ambassador on February 21 asked key political party leaders for an update on plans for the event and on the level of cooperation within the coalition (reftel). DCM, Pol/Econ Chief, and Poloff also attended the meeting. The political party leaders stressed that regional and urban opposition activists wholeheartedly support the convening of another congress.

¶3. (C) Belarusian National Front (BNF) leader Vintsuk Vyachorka, Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) leader Sergey Kalyakin, and United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoliy Lebedko claimed that in recent town hall meetings in Gomel and Minsk with coalition leaders and activists, nearly all attendees believed a congress was necessary to maintain unity in the coalition. According to Vyachorka and Lebedko, activists want the congress to restructure the coalition leadership and develop and implement coalition strategies. The leaders claimed that activists in Belarus' other four oblasts held similar views. (Note: Gomel's regional UCP leader and head of Milinkevich's "For Freedom" campaign Vladimir Katsura on February 22 announced that he and 39 Milinkevich supporters would boycott the congress if a single leader was not chosen. End note.)

¶4. (C) Kalyakin claimed that there were no serious obstacles to convening the congress on March 17-18 as originally planned. Kalyakin noted that the coalition had even made some progress on securing from the authorities a location in Minsk, although he is not optimistic that the GOB will honor any commitment. The only significant setback to the congress was Milinkevich's decision not to participate. According to the BPC leader, political parties, the intelligentsia, and coalition VIPs had all unsuccessfully tried to convince Milinkevich that his refusal to participate was a "big mistake" and a "loss" for the coalition. Clearly frustrated, Kalyakin told Ambassador that by now it was obvious Milinkevich would not agree to any conditions, which was his problem and not the coalition's.

BNF Reaches Out, Gets No Answer

¶5. (C) In order to appease Milinkevich, BNF leader Vyachorka on February 17 made a proposal promising Milinkevich that the BNF would support him as the chair of the Political Council, leader of its delegations at international talks and negotiations with GOB officials, and directing officer in control of the Presidium's activities if he participated in the congress. Vyachorka also suggested the congress be postponed from March 17-18 to May to, among other things, expand the congress to include delegates from the October 2005 democratic congress. The participation of the 2005 delegates would likely increase the number of non-party activists, which is a key demand of Milinkevich for taking

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part in the upcoming forum. To date, Milinkevich or the other party leaders have not responded to Vyachorka's proposal.

Lebedko: Milinkevich Makes It Harder to Reach Consensus

¶6. (C) Lebedko cited Vyachorka's proposal as an example of the political parties' openness to suggestions for the sake of unity (although Kalyakin doubted it would ever get the coalition's approval). The UCP leader noted that on February 22 the party leaders and Milinkevich hoped to reach consensus on the congress. (Note: Independent news source Belapan on February 22 reported that Milinkevich and party leaders agreed to form a committee to reach a settlement. End note.) However, as Lebedko noted, it was much easier for coalition leaders to come to an agreement two weeks ago than it is now (before Milinkevich publicly declared his boycott), but he asserted to Ambassador that the current situation was only temporary. Ambassador encouraged the party leaders to continue taking steps to restore unity to the coalition.

Comment

¶7. (C) The party leaders demonstrated that they were united on at least one issue; their deep frustration with Milinkevich. Clearly, Milinkevich's refusal to participate in the congress has fractured the coalition even further, but we have also observed a considerable level of tension between party leaders and their activists in the regions. Many regional opposition activists, particularly those in the UCP and BNF, are skeptical about a congress and some groups are even boycotting it. With a month left before the congress and the planned March 25 demonstration, it remains doubtful that the coalition leaders will be able to organize as impressive (and inclusive) an event as the 2005 congress.
Stewart